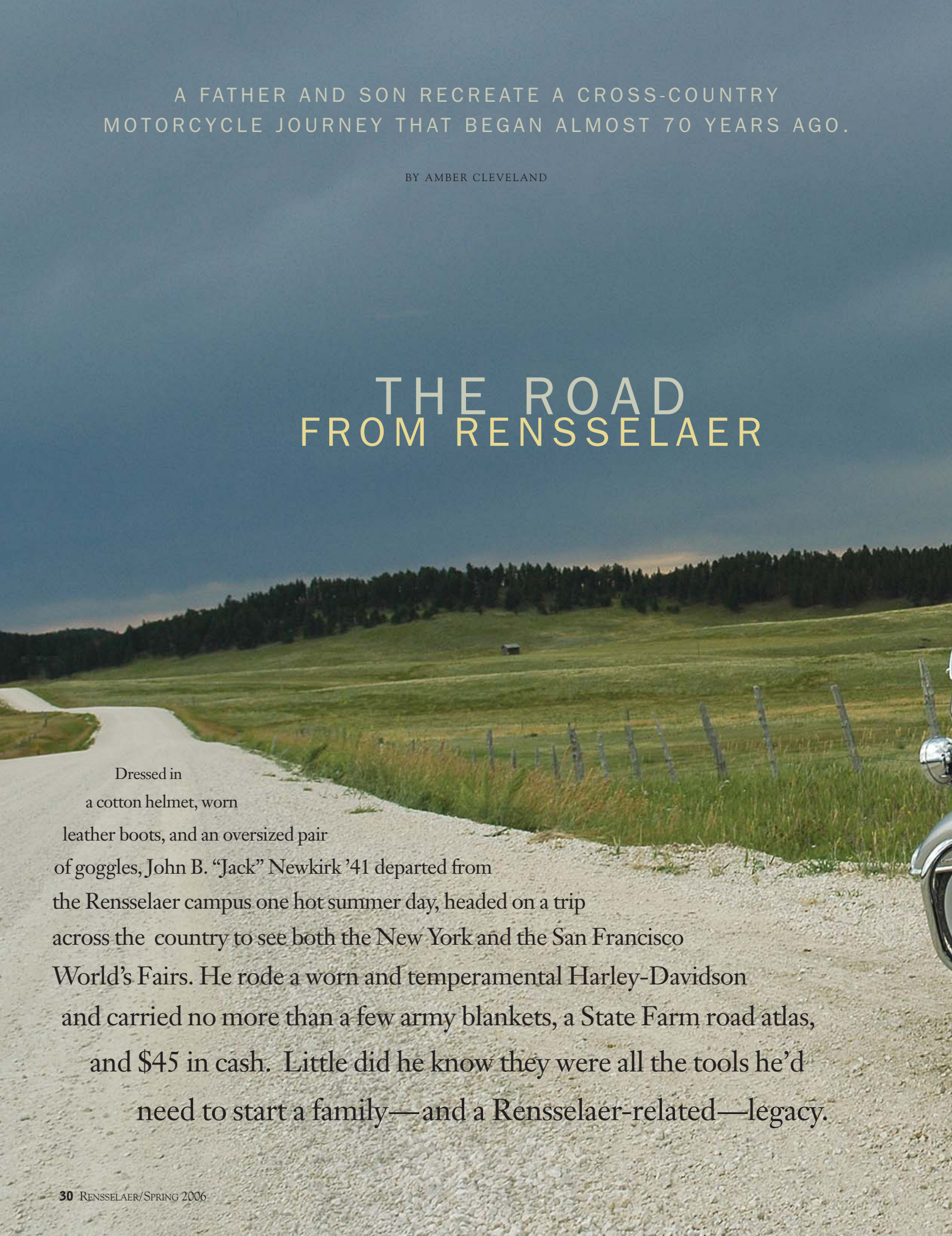


A FATHER AND SON RECREATE A CROSS-COUNTRY  
MOTORCYCLE JOURNEY THAT BEGAN ALMOST 70 YEARS AGO.

BY AMBER CLEVELAND

# THE ROAD FROM RENSSELAER



Dressed in a cotton helmet, worn leather boots, and an oversized pair of goggles, John B. “Jack” Newkirk ’41 departed from the Rensselaer campus one hot summer day, headed on a trip across the country to see both the New York and the San Francisco World’s Fairs. He rode a worn and temperamental Harley-Davidson and carried no more than a few army blankets, a State Farm road atlas, and \$45 in cash. Little did he know they were all the tools he’d need to start a family—and a Rensselaer-related—legacy.



**The year was 1939.** Early that spring semester, Jack, a 19-year-old sophomore metallurgical engineering student, bought a battered 1930 Harley VL Big Twin for \$40 from Eustace Hetzel '39, then president of the Rensselaer Student Union. With a decade's worth of mileage, the bike required major attention before it would be ready for the open road. The Harley's first stop: the Ricketts Laboratory.

The bike was in need of serious metal repair. When the welding was finished, Jack stuck a 4-inch decal of the RPI surveyor's logo on the bike's gas tank to show his appreciation for the use of Rensselaer's welding tools (and to cover up a large dent that he couldn't pound out). He called the bike the "Raspberry"—not for its red color, but for the sputtering sound it made when it ran.

Swerving up and down Burdett Avenue, Jack learned to ride the newly renovated Raspberry; as his confidence behind the handlebars grew, so too did his craving for the open road and wide horizons.

The possibility of seeing two World's Fairs in one summer was just the adventure Jack had been looking for. To jump-start the economy after the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt called for two World's Fairs, one in Flushing Meadows, N.Y., and one on Treasure Island in San Francisco. Jack was convinced that the Raspberry was up to the task of taking him to both.

"I've often asked myself why I wanted to make that trip," Jack says from his home in Evergreen, Colo. At 85, he's energetic as he talks about the cross-country trip he took 67 years ago. "Just the lure of adventure for a 19-year-old with the two World's Fairs as an excuse, I guess. It's still a wonder to me that my Dad [Burt Newkirk, who was a professor of aeronautical engineering at Rensselaer] let me go."

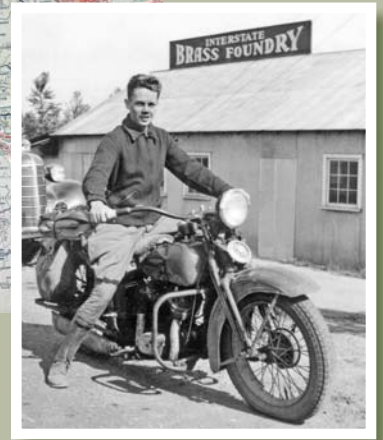
Leaving from the Rensselaer campus, Jack easily made it to "The World of Tomorrow" at the New York fair, where he saw a display of new-fangled inventions, including the world's first microwave oven, computer, and photocopier. As crowds of fairgoers gathered to see President Roosevelt's image being transmitted on the world's first television, Jack was already heading for the Raspberry. The fair was exciting, but miles of open road lay before him. Pointing his bike west he waved goodbye to the World of Tomorrow.

Squeezing every penny out of the \$45 his parents lent him for the trip, Jack bought 15-cent meals for himself and 50-cent meals for the Raspberry. At night he slept in fields or under trees. During the day he bathed in rivers and streams. As he made his way to San Francisco, he stopped and spoke with passersby who were always fascinated to hear stories of his excursion.

In mid-July he reached the Golden Gate Inter-



1939



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national Exhibition and enjoyed just one day at the site in San Francisco, celebrating Treasure Island—the world's first man-made island.

That summer Jack traveled 10,371 miles over the course of 51 days. The Raspberry, which shuddered violently while in operation, broke down every day of the trip but four. Jack credits the engineering and problem-solving training he received at Rensselaer with saving the day on more than one occasion. Even when the Raspberry was running, the bike leaked oil, bolts and wires loosened and fell out of the machine's body, and the Raspberry shook nearly out of control at speeds higher than 43 miles per hour.

By September 1939 Jack was back in New York, and he returned to Rensselaer with a summer vacation story that couldn't be matched.

"When I got back it was still summer and it didn't register to me that I did anything out of the ordinary [by taking this trip], I was just happy to have made it back unharmed," Jack says. "But when I got back to RPI, I was elated to tell people that I had pulled the trip off—I was full of stories, and boring people with the details of my trip."

In 1941 Jack received a bachelor's degree in metallurgical engineering. As America entered World War II, he paid close attention to the adventures of John "Scarsdale Jack" Newkirk '36, a cousin who also attended Rensselaer.

Scarsdale Jack graduated from Rensselaer with an aeronautical engineering degree in 1936, and later resigned a Navy commission to serve as squadron leader for the American Volunteer Group's "Flying Tigers." When he was 28 his plane was gunned down during combat. The Jack Newkirk AAS branch of Rensselaer's Air Force ROTC detachment is named in his honor.

Shortly after Scarsdale's death, Jack Newkirk also joined the Navy. By that time motorcycles had become favorable means of transportation since resources like gasoline and rubber were scarce, and Jack was able to sell the irritable Raspberry for \$125. Turning the profit into a plane ticket, Jack headed back to San Francisco where he reported for duty.

By 1946, after three years of service in the South Pacific, Jack was relieved of his military duties, and five years later he married his wife, Carolyn.

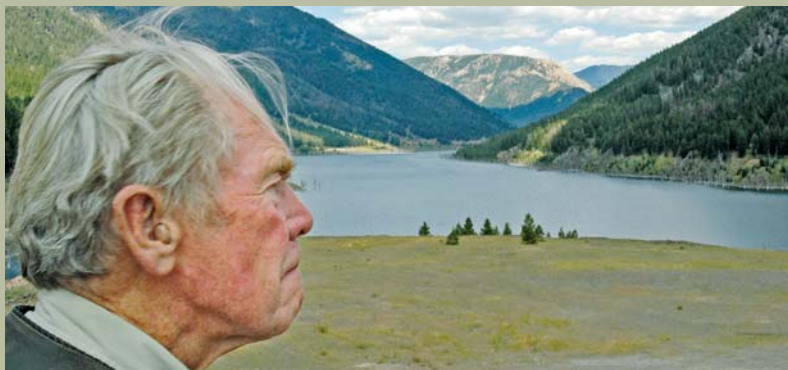
In 1965, Jack became chair of the physical metallurgy department at the University of Denver in Colorado. He and Carolyn raised four children in Colorado, and occasionally Jack shared stories of his cross-country trip with them.

**R**egardless of how many times he'd heard the stories, Jack's second oldest son, John Newkirk '83, found them entirely fascinating.

Like his father, John also attended Rensselaer. In 1983, after receiving a degree in electrical,



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2005

computer, and systems engineering, he returned home to Colorado, founded a thriving computer systems engineering business, and started a family with his wife, Melissa.

The passing of one of his father’s fellow World War II veterans in 2004 sparked a realization in the younger Newkirk that his father, who was now 84, was growing older and would someday be gone.

John was eager to connect with his father as a friend and as a mentor. He decided there was only one way to get to do this: They would recreate the cross-country trip of 1939, riding together on a Harley.

Jack says he felt “flattered that [John] would take enough interest in what I did to want to recreate the trip. I was happy to ride on the back of his bike.”

Once his father agreed to the trip, John started a year of intense preparation for the trip, intending to make his journey as authentic as possible. He bought a 1939 State Farm road atlas he found on eBay and used it to map out a modern-day replica of Jack’s route.

Since a restored 1930 Harley VL was more expensive than a new motorcycle and would probably be unreliable, John purchased a 2003 100th Anniversary Edition black and silver Harley-Davidson Road King Classic motorcycle, which he dubbed the “Blackberry.”

He feared for his father’s safety riding solo for such a long distance, so the pair agreed that Jack would meet his son on the road and would ride on the back of John’s bike for a third of the trip.

On the morning of July 12, 2005, John departed for day one of the long-anticipated trip. Consistent with his father’s journey, John stayed on two-lane highways whenever possible—there was no interstate highway system when his

father made the original trip—and kept his speed at 43 miles per hour, the point at which his father’s Raspberry became dangerously unsteady.

Arriving first in San Francisco, John found no trace of Treasure Island’s former glory. The site of the 1939 fair had little left to offer beyond a collection of military buildings from World War II. Following his dad’s route in reverse, he headed toward the heartland.

In August Jack met John in Montana and the two headed for Sturgis, S.D. Although he was crossing the territory for a second time, Jack found the land transformed and unrecognizable.

“I didn’t remember anything, really. Everything had changed,” says Jack. “The last time I went through [Sturgis] it was just a crossroads. There was a small bike rally happening but I

drove right by unknowingly. This time there were nearly 600,000 bikers gathered in the city.”

Stopping at a Sturgis motorcycle museum, the pair stumbled upon a restored 1930 Harley VL—a bike identical to the one Jack rode in 1939. While John went to ask if he could take its picture, a crowd of bikers gathered around Jack, prodding him for details about his trip.

According to John his dad got “instant respect and was treated like royalty by all the bikers who crossed [their] path.”

After 1,200 miles together, Jack flew back to Colorado, leaving John to complete the remaining two-thirds of the trip on his own.

John arrived at the site of the 1939 World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows on Sept. 15. The place was desolate and dirty, and John was shocked at what he’d traveled so far to see.

“The place was abandoned,” John says. “Relics from the 1964 fair were rusted and overgrown; papers blew around in the wind. There were no people. There was only me.

“I felt a strong sense of sadness, wondering what happened to this place,” John says. “Was this the World of Tomorrow my father’s generation had been promised?”

John began to recall what he’d seen across the country.

“By this time Katrina had hit and all along my trip I saw folks helping fellow Americans. There was pride and patriotism evident from California to New York, and I saw extreme freedom. Suddenly my sadness turned to fierce pride and I felt great respect for my father’s generation who provided me with the freedom to take this trip.”

John is currently writing a book, titled *The Old Man and the Harley*, which recounts his father’s solo trip across the country in 1939, comparing it to his own journey during the

summer of 2005. It is tentatively scheduled for release on June 18 (Father’s Day).

Nearly 70 years later, Jack’s trip across the country on a cantankerous motorcycle has become a lasting family legacy. John says he’s considering recreating the trip in 2039, 100 years after his father’s original journey, and hopes his two daughters will accompany him.

Inheritance is defined as a valued possession passed down in a family through succeeding generations. The Newkirk family inheritance is not a single possession any of them can hold in their hands. It’s an experience. It’s 10,371 miles.

Jack and John are returning to Rensselaer in June for Reunion 2006—this will be Jack’s 65th. No word yet on whether they’ll travel by motorcycle.

